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SUBJECT: SHARP DECLINE IN INTERNAL DISPLACEMENTS, CHALLENGES REMAIN

REF: 09 BOGOTA 3267

CLASSIFIED BY: Mark A. Wells, Political Counselor, US Embassy Bogota;
REASON: 1.4B, D

Summary

¶11. (C) The Colombian Government (GOC) and local NGO Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) both reported new internal displacements declined, 47% and 24% respectively, in 2009. The GOC attributed the decline to consolidated state presence, reduced violence from the conflict, and better internally displaced persons (IDP) registration systems. CODHES acknowledged the decline, but focused more on what it views as the causes of continuing displacement: paramilitaries/new criminal groups competing for control, GOC security operations against illegal armed groups, illegal armed groups carrying out attacks and threats, aerial fumigation and forced eradication efforts, and urban violence. International organizations also noted a decrease in displacement, but cautioned it may not be sustainable. Estimates put the cumulative total of displacements between 3.3 and 4.9 million persons since 1985. Even with the decline, the GOC, international organizations, and civil society remain concerned about continuing levels of displacement and how to effectively respond. End Summary.

GOC's IDP Figures Show Sharp Decline

¶12. (SBU) Social Action (Accion Social), the GOC's agency for coordinating humanitarian assistance for IDPs, reported a 47% decline in displacements during the past year, with 111,414 new IDPs in 2009 (as of December 31, 2009) compared with 210,441 new IDPs in 2008 (as of December 31, 2008). The 2008 figure for new displacements eventually climbed to 301,817 during 2009 as the government added more cases to the registry. Based on this trend, Juan Pablo Franco, the director of IDP assistance programs at Social Action, told the Embassy's Regional Refugee Coordinator

(RefCoord) that he expected the 2009 figure to increase to 150,000 IDPs over the coming year. This would still represent a 50% decline compared with the 301,817 new IDPs in 2008.

Why Displacement Declined?

¶13. (SBU) After significant decreases over the past decade in kidnappings, murders, terrorist attacks, and other security-related indicators, internal displacements finally showed a sharp drop in **¶2009**. The GOC attributed the decline to consolidated state presence, reduced violence from the conflict, and better IDP verification systems. The positive impact of improved state presence and security is evident in the sustained decline in mass displacements (defined as displacement of a group of 50 or more persons). From 2000 to 2002 -- years marked by widespread killings, violence, and threats perpetrated primarily by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) -- mass displacement events caused more than 300,000 persons to flee their homes. Since then, a combination of strategic blows against the FARC, demobilization of more than 30,000 paramilitaries, and increased state presence has contributed to a 92% decrease in IDPs from mass displacements from the peak of 100,451 in 2002 to only 7,493 in 2009.

¶14. (C) Franco also cited improved verification of IDP claims as a contributing factor in the decline. Social Action refused 36% of IDP registrations as ineligible in 2009 (including many from persons seeking to fraudulently receive IDP benefits) compared with a 20% refusal rate in 2007. Franco explained that Social Action has strengthened the verification system by cross-referencing IDP claims with information collected from across the GOC. For instance, an applicant may claim to have been displaced from an area with a high-level of conflict-related violence, but Social Action is able to determine that the person was actually living and accessing government services in an entirely different, safer part of the country. Martin Bissig, the humanitarian assistance coordinator with the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) Colombia, told RefCoord that ICRC was also now using this information in conjunction with home visits and other follow-up

mechanisms to assess its cases. In 2009, ICRC refused approximately 50% of applications for IDP assistance.

Human Rights NGO Also Reports a Decline in Displacement

¶15. (U) The local NGO CODHES issued its annual report on January 27 stating that an estimated 286,389 persons were displaced during 2009, a 24% decrease compared with its estimate for 2008. The CODHES report, however, primarily focused on what it views as the causes of ongoing displacement, including: paramilitaries/new criminal groups competing for control over land and illicit economic activities, GOC security operations against illegal armed groups, illegal armed groups carrying out attacks and threats, aerial fumigations and forced eradication of illicit crops, and urban violence. CODHES noted that the GOC had significantly increased budgetary resources and improved access for IDPs to humanitarian assistance, health services, and basic education in recent years. At the same time, CODHES argued that the quality of services remained insufficient to fully guarantee IDP rights and called for the complete reformulation of policies for housing, income generation, land restitution, and truth, justice, and reparations for IDPs. In June 2009, the Constitutional Court also recognized these deficiencies and ordered Social Action to appear before the Court again in June 2010 to report on progress in rectifying what the Court found to be an "unconstitutional state of affairs" in the government's IDP response.

16. (U) CODHES also expressed concern with land concentration trends in rural areas and the disproportionate impact of displacement on ethnic minorities. In a February 11 presentation on the annual report, CODHES President Marco Romero explained that large economic projects (e.g., ranching, bio-fuels, mining, and energy) were having a negative impact in rural areas and in some cases spurring displacement. Romero said that 20 years ago, approximately 5% of the population owned 20% of the land, whereas 5% now owns 75% of the land. Additionally, an estimated 5.5 million hectares of land belonging to at least 380,000 families were lost from 1997-2007 as a result of the conflict. Romero stressed that much of this trend has had a disproportionate effect on ethnic minorities. Per CODHES' estimation, 83% of the 77 mass displacement events the NGO recorded in 2009 affected Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups.

Why the Difference in Numbers?

17. (SBU) The calculation of displacement numbers is politically sensitive. The cumulative total of IDPs registered by the GOC now stands at 3.3 million, while CODHES estimates 4.9 million have been displaced since 1985. The figures vary widely due to differing methodologies. CODHES uses an estimation of displacement based on media reports, field visits, and information collected from various other sources, including the GOC, international organizations, and the Catholic Church. CODHES includes IDPs from urban violence, aerial fumigation and forced manual eradication of illicit crops, as well as those displaced as a result of poor economic conditions/food insecurity created by the conflict. The GOC registry includes only persons who have registered with Social Action and who have been determined to have suffered conflict-related violence. It does not recognize illicit crop eradication efforts as a cause of displacement.

18. (SBU) CODHES claims the GOC arbitrarily denies many cases and does not adequately recognize displacement from urban violence and new criminal groups. CODHES insists that new criminal groups formed after demobilization of the AUC may be more fragmented and using different names, but they still employ the same modus operandi previously used by the paramilitaries. The GOC strongly rejects this characterization. It acknowledges that some former paramilitaries have joined criminal groups, but they do not constitute neo-paramilitarism. Juan Pablo Franco told RefCoord that the government does recognize displacement caused by some of these criminal groups -- depending on the group, location, and circumstances of the individual case. In 2009, for instance, Social Action included in the national registry 14,046 new IDPs who claimed to be displaced by paramilitaries/new criminal groups.

International Organizations Note Decline As Well

19. (C) International organizations agreed that displacement declined in 2009. ICRC Colombia showed a 30% decline in the number of IDPs it assisted during the year, helping 51,176 IDPs in 2009 compared to 73,258 in 2008. According to ICRC's analysis, several factors contributed to this decline, including: a change in the dynamic of the conflict (i.e., less head-to-head confrontations between security forces and illegal armed groups); a shift in the conflict and displacement to more remote, less populated areas; and an increase in reluctance of people affected by the conflict to abandon their land and livelihoods. There were also several

internal reasons at ICRC that lead to the lower number of IDPs assisted, including: closure of assistance projects in the municipalities of Apartado (Antioquia Department), Valledupar (Cesar Department), and Sincelejo (Sucre Department); reinforcement of IDP claim verification procedures; and the GOC's increased capacity to respond to mass displacements.

¶10. (C) The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) also noted a decline in displacement. Acting Country Representative Roberto Mignone told RefCoord that three factors likely contributed to the decrease in the GOC's IDP figures: 1) GOC consolidation and prevention mechanisms are starting to have an impact; 2) the epicenter of the conflict has shifted to more remote, less populated Pacific Coast and Southern border regions; and 3) the GOC refused more IDP registrations. However, UNHCR felt the decline may not be sustainable heading into the election year as illegal armed groups attempt to prove their relevance by impeding GOC efforts to expand state presence. ICRC agreed that conditions contributing to the decline in displacement could change quickly.

Encouraging Trend, but Challenges Remain

¶11. (C) The GOC, international organizations, and civil society all recognized the encouraging decline in displacements, but remained concerned about continuing displacement and how to effectively respond. Part of the challenge is the magnitude of the problem. There is not a mechanism for an IDP to cease to be displaced and removed from the government registry. As such, the cumulative total of IDPs registered with the government -- currently 3.3 million -- continues to grow as does the associated financial burden. The GOC is required by law to provide emergency and socio-economic assistance indefinitely to all registered IDPs who need it. As a practical solution, Social Action is seeking a change in the law to establish time limits on assistance and to develop guidance for removing a person from the IDP registry, but that is a tough sell in an election year.

¶12. (C) The GOC and international organizations may not agree on how the policies are implemented, but there is general consensus that security, land, and socio-economic integration are the keys to addressing displacement. The benefit of improved state presence and security is twofold: it builds more cohesive communities that can withstand the pressures of displacement in the first place, and it creates conditions that allow for the return of IDPs. Social Action estimates that fewer than 20% of IDPs want to return given current conditions, but more will go back if security is improved and land is available. The GOC plans to return 120,000 IDPs under its "To Return is To Live" program in 2010. In this respect, viable land restitution and tenure programs are important to help prevent secondary displacements in the future. Finally, many IDPs from rural areas who have lived in urban areas for years may not want to ever return, especially the youth. For them, practical integration and employment opportunities are vital to achieving socio-economic stabilization and emerging from the state of displacement.

¶13. (C) To meet these requirements, the GOC has increased its annual IDP budget from \$67 million in 2003 to more than \$700 million in 2010. This significant increase is not sustainable indefinitely and allocation of resources does not necessarily translate into results on the ground. The GOC is working on improving its programs and policies for IDPs, but it will take some time before 25-plus years of conflict and displacement can be resolved and rights fully restored. For our part, the United States provided more than \$60 million (through the State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and USAID) in FY 2009 to

support GOC, international organization, and NGO efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, socioeconomic stabilization, and technical assistance.

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